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TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS.

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CIVILIZED MAN'S HISTORY BEGAN WITH THE PROCESS OF GATHERING KNOWLEDGE AND, WHEN NEW KNOWLEDGE BEGAN TO CONFLICT WITH OLD KNOWLEDGE, THE DEVELOPING OF A CRITICAL AND QUESTIONING ATTITUDE. SINCE THE RENAISSANCE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT THERE HAS BEEN A CONTINUOUS EROSION OF THE IDEA THAT EDUCATION AND THE POWER IT FURNISHES OVER SOCIETY ARE THE PRIVILEGE OF AN ELITE, AND A GROWING AWARENESS THAT EDUCATION DOES NOT MEAN BEING CONDITIONED TO CONFORM INTELLECTUALLY, POLITICALLY, OR THEOLOGICALLY, BUT IS CONCERNED WITH HELPING THE INDIVIDUAL TO INTERPRET AND INTERACT WITH HIS WORLD. BECAUSE TECHNOLOGY, IN THE LAST TWO DECADES, HAS FURTHER LIBERATED THE COMMON MAN AND BECAUSE INFORMATION IS SO QUICKLY SUPERCEDED BY NEW INFORMATION, EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS TODAY MUST PRODUCE LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE WITH CREATIVE AND CRITICAL INTELLECTS WHO ARE FLEXIBLE, INSIGHTFUL, AND RETRAINABLE, AND HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES AS WELL AS MECHANICAL SKILLS. THIS KIND OF PERSON CANNOT BE PRODUCED BY AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM WHICH OVEREMPHASIZES REGIMENTATION, BUSYWORK, DRILL, AND MEMORIZATION. ALL TOO OFTEN, TEACHERS OF ENGLISH SUFFER FROM A LACK OF "IMAGINATIVE PARTICIPATION" IN THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF YOUTH. THE OVEREMPHASIS OF SKILLS AND FACT-FINDING PREVENTS LEADING THE STUDENT TO THE CREATIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF SKILLS IN THE COMPLETE HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF IMPRESSION, INTERNALIZATION, AND EXPRESSION. TEACHERS OF ENGLISH MUST HELP THEIR STUDENTS TO THINK AND FEEL MORE DEEPLY, LIVE MORE ABUNDANTLY, AND CREATE MORE FEELINGLY AND UNDERSTANDINGLY. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA," NUMBER 5, AUGUST 1967. (DL)

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H. P. SCHOENHEIMER

Towards a Synthesis

Henry Schoenheimer is a man of vigorous opinion. To his position as Lecturer in Method of English at Monash University, he brings experience as a classroom teacher in both primary and secondary schools. He is known throughout Australia as a controversialist, particularly through his work as educational correspondent for *The Australian*. He has also written and edited a number of books, of which the latest is *Education through English* (Cheshire, Melbourne, 1967).

I have been asked to speak to you today on the topic 'Towards a Synthesis'. This is a hopeful title in an age of analysis when the wise men of the day, like the sophists of another age, are more concerned to take things to pieces and when no reliable pattern or purpose appears to emerge.

What I want to try to do is to set teaching generally and English teaching specifically against a wider background and to try to weave them into some total pattern. To do this, I hope to use four models. They will be large and rather crude models in the time available but all of them, I hope, will be relevant to our present situation in the human adventure.

I want to look first of all, very briefly, at the human past generally, and then to survey the education strand in it. Next, I would like to say something about the total present human condition; and finally I shall glance at the situation in English teaching and learning within that situation and against that background. Inevitably everything I say will tend to be over-simplified.

Let us look, for a moment, first at man as he moves out of pre-history and establishes his early civilization. This civilization is man's evolutionary product after he emerges from the animal stage where learning is by unconscious biological adaption. Gradually we find life developing towards beginnings of a culture; and with man we find evolution taking this cultural rather than biological form. This is what Julian Huxley has called the stage of psycho-social evolution.

At this early stage, the intellectual task, as man establishes his culture

in the first civilization, is primarily the gathering of knowledge and adding to it.

In that brief time I have covered an era of mankind's history from perhaps 20, perhaps 10 million years ago, to something like 800 B.C. Who says that précis has no value?

With the Athenian Greeks, and in a somewhat different sense with the Romans and Hebrews also, we find something added to this business of gathering knowledge. We find now that as the quantity of knowledge increases, there develop internal contradictions, so that there is criticising of the old knowledge, and generation of new knowledge to conflict with the old. And in all this a questioning attitude begins to develop.

In the western tradition, we move on to early Christianity, then the return of barbarism, the threat of the destruction of much of the Western human heritage. Emphasis goes back again on to the preservation of knowledge and on to permanency, which is the typical human reaction to insecurity, fear and impermanence.

The next historical marker I want to set up is in the renaissance period, moving on through the reformation to the age of reason, when we find once again the interaction of criticism of old knowledge and the generation of new knowledge. On that model we are still a post-renaissance people, even though one may somewhat keenly feel that one is noticing signs of a swing of the pendulum in the present era.

Now, as I said, this is a rough model, not very accurate, but accurate or not, it suggests a basic pattern showing the essential emphasis of certain ages.

I should like to go back over that territory and look at it educationally. In man's pre-history and during his early history, theoretical knowledge was the preserve of the priesthood, a small privileged class. This was the knowledge that gave power, power over the physical environment and, inter-relatedly and consequentially, power over society. Education for the privileged class consisted of the mastery of this theoretical knowledge. For the masses, 'education' or enculturation consisted of learning a vocation and learning to conform within a society.

With the Greeks, and again in a certain sense with the Romans and Hebrews, we find the emerging idea of democracy, an idea which was to become embryonically even wider in Christianity. Now the privileged class is extended to include all citizens, so that the right of theoretical knowledge and the almost automatic correlative of a critical and creative approach to this knowledge was extended to a much wider group. So we have, and especially is this true, of course, with the Athenian Greeks, the emergence of divergent thinking, sharing of

thought and experience and continuous production of more knowledge. This is a wider educational pattern which comes to an end with the defeat of Athens, symbolised by the conservative educational philosophy of Plato whom I sometimes rank with Enid Blyton as a literary advocate of conformity. And, of course, at no stage was it a completely dominant pattern, nor always a major one; but its mere existence, in however limited a degree, was extraordinarily significant.

In spite of the promise inherent in Christianity, we return to the Dark Ages and see the cultural heritage become the preserve of a priestcraft. In order to perpetuate itself and its learning, it establishes its own education system in and around the church. In later times by control of the theoretical wisdom of its time, the priestly caste establishes an ascendancy and a power to direct conforming masses once again.

Out of the renaissance and the reformation and the age of reason and the enlightenment there came, amongst other things, a more conscious human realization that knowledge is power. There came, secondly, the idea of man as having the power to change the material world and along with this notion the idea that he had also the power to change social relationships: that conformity to misery and poverty is not man's eternal destiny, but that these are human phenomena, results of human choices and decisions about social and economic organization.

Even more, we find emerging the idea of a power to change man by changing his environment. This is a subversive idea, not yet fully grasped. In our society it is represented on two wings: the one progressive, which sees the potential within education for those who are described as the culturally deprived; and the regressive wing which sees within this power to change man through acting on his environment, the possibility of manipulation of the mass mind, in ways that we read about in *The Hidden Persuaders* and *Battle for the Mind.*

What has been happening all the time, in other words, is the continuous erosion of the idea that education is the privilege of an élite, or that only the élite are significantly educable. In the seventeenth century we saw education spreading to the commercial classes, and this was the start, or better, the changing into second gear, of a realisation that more people have more potential for more liberalising education at a theoretical level. Potential for acquiring knowledge yes, but also a potential for using it critically and creatively. The educational spokesman for this concept is Rousseau, influenced by Locke.

Rousseau's claims are extravagant and his theories often unsound, but fundamentally what he said was this: that education does not mean being conditioned or manipulated to conform intellectually, politically or theologically; that true education cannot take place in

terms of a human being as a creature of original sin, into whom goodness has to be hammered or scared or cajoled or bribed. What Rousseau proposed instead was that we grow or are educated in our own environment, in our physical, social and intellectual environment, and that we have within us the capacity for being loving, enquiring and creative beings.

If this is so, then, education should be concerned primarily not with passing on the known and accepted, but with helping the individual to interpret his world and to interact with it. Putting this another way, Rousseau said that social systems and education systems are for man, rather than that man is to be conditioned by education systems to fit into social systems.

It may be as well here to pause a moment and ask practising teachers how far they think the human race has come during these millions of years. What is the total pattern of education in your classroom here and now? In classrooms as I see them the forces of authoritarianism are still strong. Education (or instruction) systems seek, basically, to use the individual as a depository of knowledge and skills so that he may function in the economic system; and as an automatic corollary, education (or instruction) systems seek, and must seek, conformity.

With this in mind, let us look a little more broadly at the current social and educational situation. In the past, the restraints inducing, indeed, demanding mass conformity have been political, theological, intellectual; that is, they have followed from different interpretations of the human situation on this planet. The exciting thing about the age we are now living in, is that this human situation has been totally changed at its base, at what the Marxists like to call the infra-structure.

What has changed fundamentally is the relationship between man and his environment. It has changed in the last two decades in two ways at least. The first of these ways is technological. Man now has a power over his physical environment, which is not only quantitatively but qualitatively different from what it was before, say, the late 1940s or early '50s. Today, there is no longer any need for the mass of men to accept conformity to nature as an almost inflexible pattern. We know how to make the environment yield satisfactions at far less human cost in toil and sacrifice: that is to say, we can to a very large extent remove the compulsory element from the life of man.

This is the new world phenomenon. The common man can use his environment to fulfil his human creative destiny. This is something that was possible in the past for only a tiny minority whose freedom rested on the slavery, or the effective slavery, of the many. Even Rousseau saw his new education as something for the bourgeoisie; but since 1950 or thereabouts, the challenge to education is metaphorically,

and to a large extent literally, to straighten the back of the man with the hoe, to change his attitude of body, his attitude of mind, to help him to realise that he can now stand erect on his own two feet. The brotherhood of man, not the big brotherhood, is economically and therefore organisationally possible.

This is the total pattern of human living that is emerging now. Poverty, hunger, cold, endemic disease, and the human misery and degradation that go with them, are technologically obsolete or at least obsolescent on this planet, and could be banished in the lifetime of the people we now teach.

A second vital point with tremendous educational repercussions is this: that the same technological revolution that has brought this state of affairs to pass, is calling for a different kind of human being, the product of a higher kind of education, and calling for him in ever-increasing large numbers. What is required is not merely a person with knowledge and mechanical skills, the sort of person who could answer the demands of the first industrial revolution and of our social and economic situation of a generation ago. What is needed now is a person of creative, critical intellect with an understanding of theoretical principles, flexible, insightful, able to meet the changing situation with original responses; the sort of person who can be re-trained and re-educated as new knowledge develops, new principles are brought to light.

Present thinking, I believe, is that engineers will need to be completely re-trained every fifteen or twenty years. But how often such complete re-education will be necessary for teachers has not been determined.

Are our students good enough to face the challenge of this oncoming world of change. Are yours? Of course they are not. They never were either, or so our teachers said in their time. It is quite inconceivable that evolution, having produced such a generation as ourselves after two and a half thousand million years, could do anything but drop away suddenly at the other side of the graph.

But for fancy's sake, let us take the view for the moment that our students do have the same capacities for adaption as we have. This adaptability is being demanded not merely in the technical and economic fields, but also in our social and political thinking and attitudes, in our moral and ethical outlooks. Here, no less than in job training, critical understanding in terms of principles, rather than mere knowledge and stereotyped reactions, is the requirement of this dizzying age where the future becomes the past almost before we have realised that it is the present.

The ancient Egyptian, Sumerian or Chinese peasant passing on his

knowledge, and even the priestcraft passing on theirs, could look for truth in the past or in the future and the view in each direction was very much the same. This is no longer the case.

The decisions that will be required of them mean that we need the person who does not shrink away from responsibility or call on some charismatic super-figure to show the absolute rightness which does not exist in this our universe. As John Dewey was wont to say, the future is fraught with uncertainty, and man must be educated to accept this fact.

The educational challenge, then, is to produce a person able to make wise, responsible judgements, to act co-operatively, generously and nobly in varying circumstances. He must act thus not because he is trained to do what he is told, for this would be a contradiction in terms. There is no nobility or generosity in obedience, there is no educational value in the dicta: 'Be democratic or I'll flog you', or, 'Stay in and write out one hundred times *I must be creative*'. The people we are educating must come to act as I have suggested because the overall pattern of their educational experience has freed them from the bonds of conformity and has given them that wisdom and courage to accept responsibility in the future that are born only of doing so in the past. This is the generation we have to strive to help educate, we with our sins and our weaknesses thick upon us. If we fail, the problem of the education of the next-but-one generation does not arise. And again I ask what is happening in your school? What is happening in your classroom?

Here, then, is an awesome task. What are the problems, and what are the possibilities?

The two basic formulae of control of the twentieth century seem to me to be $E=mc^2$ and $S \rightarrow R$. The first is a formula for the control of things. The second attempts to find a way to control people. The one is based on research into the physical environment which is mechanical and repetitive, and it has provided the basis of the control over that environment on which the potential of freedom and plenty for mankind depends. The other formula rests, I believe, on a misinterpretation of human nature, and seeks a similar control.

At times I thought I detected in this conference overtones of the attitude which attempts to find, by research, measures for control of human beings. Here and there I thought I heard people saying, in effect, 'At the moment you do have to use human beings for some educational processes—poor quality, I agree, but the best we've got. However,' they seemed to imply, 'when the researchers have really got down to the job and teamed up with the computers, then we shall not have to depend on fallible human creatures to make love, to make

poetry, and to make judgements.'

I can't resist quoting here a verse that a student recently appended to his assignment in educational measurement. It said:

> *As long as you and I have mouths and lips which*
> *Are finely made for kissing and to sing with*
> *What do we care if some cock-eyed son-of-a-bitch*
> *Invents an instrument to measure Spring with?*

I feel that the essential function of research is to tell us what not to do: in other words to tell us what we have been doing wrongly in our attempts to free human beings to seek human objectives creatively and originally. For this reason I believe that the attempt (and in many cases a very serious attempt) to apply universally the S→R formula must fail because of its faulty theory of human nature. What lends especial urgency to the need for awareness of this fundamental error is that the attempt to impose its consequences may result in bringing down civilisation and destroying the planet, precisely at the time when man triumphant is ready to emerge from his previous bondage to nature.

Now it is against this background, that I see the classroom situation. There are no absolutes in teaching practice or anywhere else. There are no one-hundred-per-cent rules, and none of us can hope to follow an infallible course. Rather, what matters is the overall pattern, the fundamental emphasis, the essential ethos of the school and classroom situation.

Many teachers are saying to their students by their pattern of teaching that the basic human values are: sit and listen, do as I say, do as the textbook says, do as the examiner says—do not think critically, do not create, do not originate. Remember the facts, accept the judgements and decisions of authority, past and present, on what is important, on standards, values, behaviour. Conform, conform, conform! And it is possible to be saying this in the actions that speak louder and deeper than words, even while the words themselves may appear to be saying precisely the opposite. By their deeds shall ye know them. The teacher who stands all day on his dais as a figure of authority, with students, permissive, inferior in immovable desks, grinding for the bulk of their time at grill and drill exercises in the mechanics of English; memorising four lines from Act II and six from Act III; writing between 300 and 400 words, one paragraph of introduction, two fact paragraphs and one paragraph of conclusion on topics selected by the teacher and written for no true human purpose but for the teacher to mark with the red pencil; such a teacher is demanding and producing conformity even while in words he exhorts the student to creativity and originality.

For we build rigidity into our educational structure in our physical layout of rooms and schools, in our attitudes, through the efforts of those fiends who write text books. Because I have been guilty of writing text books myself, I have a terrible recurring dream. I imagine that I am at the pearly gates facing St Peter. Looking down my dossier he says 'Hmm! Murder, rape, arson . . . oh, yes, all the usual things. Ha, wait a minute, it says here that you wrote a text book! Out!' Even so, I still find it astonishing that if a page of a text book has eight sentences on it, many teachers are content to turn those eight sentences, which were intended for a five-minute exercise, into a lesson. Some day I shall write a text book on which one page has nothing but a full stop.

I should like to recapitulate this overview of the total educational situation with one final note. It is worth remarking that though those who exercise control in industrial communities have always been persuaded that they are scraping the bottom of the intellectual barrel, they have always found unsuspected depths in it when a new turn in history, such as the industrial revolution of the last century and its second stage early in this one, produced new demands. The barrel is obviously not bottomless, but the contents are fluid, and achievement appears to be quite definitely a product of two factors: potential ability and the environmental resources devoted to its development.

I come now, at last and a very long last you may think it, to consider the position of the teacher of English, and a magnificently privileged position it is. For in English there is no great body of defined subject matter that has to be mastered willy-nilly, though in a sense all knowledge is grist to the mill. The skills to be acquired, the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking, are not something to graft on to the human being, but extensions of his personality that make for richer and deeper two-way communication with other human beings through his and their expressed thoughts and feelings.

What this means is that we are in the business of helping the human young, your students, to think and feel more deeply, to live more abundantly, to create more feelingly and more understandingly. But what do we do? All too often, over-awed by the prestige accorded masses of knowledge and complex mechanical skills in this, the most materialist age the world has ever known, we go round desperately fossicking in the slag heaps of rejected rubble, for chunks of specifically 'English' knowledge that we can compel our students to acquire and for mechanical skills that we can urge them to try to master. We forget about the human being who is finding himself by feeling and doing, and by expressing to himself and to others the inwardness of his experience in a process that is at once creativity, communication

and self-realisation. We concentrate instead on the eight kinds of pronouns and the prepositions that none but the embryonic cryptographers can ever fully distinguish from adverbs. When new grammars appear, we gloat—they are so formidably difficult. A definition of an up-to-date grammarian is one who is only one-and-a-half grammars behind. You may laugh but the devils are working while you sleep. We replace the experiences of literature, literature heard, literature read, literature leading onwards and upwards to maturity and deeper understanding, with facts to be memorised, devices to be spotted, allusions to be tracked down and labelled (all legitimate, but in their inferior places). We look on prose, secondly as something to be read, and primarily as something to be précised. We take the finest poetry that was written to speak to the soul, and we treat it as crude base metal to be refined by literary criticisms into the pure gold of the pat examination answer. We act on the assumption that a wide vocabulary is a kind of oral vaccine that can be inserted into the pupil by regular dosages. Having thus taken the flesh and blood of experience in English by the throat and strangled the life out of it, having presented dish after unpalatable dish of dry bones year after year to our students until their gorges rise at the mere mention of English, we console ourselves for our stupidity by talking about heredity and IQs.

In essence, what is at fault, of course, is the teacher's failure of imaginative participation—participation in the educational experience of youth. Within the last weeks I have been moving around the schools watching young teachers conducting classes for the first time. About every fourth one is asked to take a forty-minute lesson on noun clauses or adverbs of time or on some similar, madly unexciting topic. I saw one young teacher offering poetry to a group of 15-year-old girls, young women on the brink of maturity. She had two of them out in front pretending to be lions, slapping handies for minutes at a time like kindergarteners. I saw another put on a recording of 'Barbara Allen' sung by Burl Ives, during which I sat back with the rest of Form IV and began to weep just a little internally as Barbara announced 'Young man, I think you're dying'. Then as, in the song, 'the church yard bells began to toll . . .' the young lady whipped off the pick-up head, remarking 'The rest of that is not on your sheet—let's get on with the lesson.'

This is the sort of thing I mean by failure of imaginative participation. Perhaps it is unfair to quote new young teachers, yet they teach as they were taught, and no graduate in English who had been taught truly to appreciate and understand literature at school and at university could (I repeat 'could' not 'would') fly so far in the face of anything remotely resembling literary experience. This sort of literary crime is

as much in keeping with the forty-minute lesson in formal grammar and the memorised stanzas and the rest, as it is at variance with the human response—emotional and creative—that, above all, English teachers should seek.

At this stage, I must say that I am not suggesting that knowledge and skill should be entirely eliminated from the teaching of English, or that we should cease to pay attention to them. I am suggesting that they are bones: essential, fundamental, but bones, bearing the same relationship to the beautiful body of English language and literature that her skeleton bears to Lollabrigida, in whom, of course, I should be considerably less interested if she were filleted. Yet if I had to choose I would choose the fillets.

Now, all or most of this neurotically exaggerated over-emphasis on fact-finding and skill-getting, is an historic hangover from that earliest period when the needs of the economy and of society were to treat human beings as storehouses of knowledge and skills that could be tapped and poured out into the economy and into the new generation. Today, in the age of plenty and potential plenty, the world of social affairs and the worlds of industry and commerce are calling for the different kind of human being I have referred to, the original, flexible person. He has knowledge and skills, surely; but he can—and he must use them as the basis for creative action. The attempt to fill everybody up with all this knowledge and skills in an age of knowledge explosion is foredoomed to failure. I have no sympathy with the scientists who ask me what they are to do when the amount of sheer knowledge in their field is doubling every ten years. They remind me of a man pushing a wheel-barrow and complaining how fast he must run to keep up. Yet, unless I mistake the signs completely, it is knowledge-getting rather than growth of personality that is calling an ever faster tune to the pedagogues.

What I interpret this conference to have been saying is this.

That the fundamental need of the human being is for education through experience: experience at first hand in the environment, experience interpreted through the physical and social sciences humanely understood, experience mediated through poetry, prose and drama, through film and the arts; experience rich and varied which the teacher, and above all the English teacher, should help to provide. It seems, further, that no human experience is truly complete unless it involves impression, internalization and expression. In all of our fields, then, in poetry, prose, drama, film and the arts, the pupil must find the joy of knowing, feeling and creating, sometimes as an individual, sometimes as a member of the group.

It is in this systole and diastole of impression and expression, that

he learns to function as a truly live person. I am not sure whether a child ought to write a little original work quite every day. I am quite sure he should not do formal grammar every week. I am certain that he should read for pleasure, in school, and speak for purposeful communication a very great deal. I would count that English lesson as probably lost in which he has not thrown back his head a few times and laughed—unless it was a lesson in which, in sympathy with the writer or artist, he has been near to tears, or beyond it.

The greatest enemies of English teachers as a body, are the—English teachers. Examiners, after all, can only set up examination hurdles. It is not they who compel the narrow training regimen that fear imposes on many teachers—certainly not in the junior forms, and not nearly so much in the senior ones as they are credited, or debited, with doing. Text book writers can do no more than write text books. It is not they who control teachers into a rigid prescription of one dreary exercise per forty-minute lesson.

The best English teachers I know work like the very devil, but unlike the devil they place their faith in the pupil. The worst teachers may or may not work equally hard (you have heard it said of Satan that he is a very industrious body) but they put their faith first in pre-selected and pre-packaged material, in instruction rather than in education, in conformity rather than in creativity, in the subject rather than the person. Their watchword is rigidity—the rigid adherence to the set syllabus, to the routine method, to the one-lesson-one-activity pattern, to the military rows of desks facing the commanding officer. When they are rewarded—or punished—with rigidity and frigidity they are pained and surprised.

In this crisis of nerve that characterizes the last third of the twentieth century, it is obvious that our first need, socially and educationally, is faith: faith in children who are the future; faith in ourselves, who are the present; faith in our subject, by means of which we bring the insights of past and present to bear on present and future. It seems to me that this is what education is about, it seems that this is what English is about, and it seems high time that we were about it.